

THE UPANISHAD: Intro

A. Vedas:

1. Rig, Sama, Yajur, and Atharva, the epics
2. Largest part of each collection, called Karma Kanda, preserves the hymns and philosophical interpretations of rituals used in Hindu worship to this day.
3. The second part of each Veda, called jnana kanda, concerns not ritual but wisdom: what life is about; what death means; what the human being is, and the nature of the Godhead that sustains us; in a word, the burning questions that men and women have asked in every age.
4. What is an Upanishad? Etymologically the word suggests “sitting down near”: that is, at the feet of an illumined teacher in an intimate session of spiritual instruction.
5. They teach that this Reality is the essence of every created thing, and the same Reality is our real Self, so that each of us is one with the power that created and sustains the universe.
6. And, finally, they testify that this oneness can be realized directly, without the mediation of priests or rituals or any of the structures of organized religion, not after death but in this life, and that this is the purpose for which each of us has been born and the goal toward which evolution moves.

B. The Supreme Science:

1. They are darshana, “something seen,” and the student to whom they were taught was expected not only to listen to

the words but to realize them: that is, to make their truths an integral part of character, conduct, and consciousness.

2. A law of nature must apply uniformly and universally.
3. They observed dreams and the state of dreamless sleep and asked what is “known” in each, and
 - what faculty could be said to be the knower.
 - What exactly is the difference between a dream and waking experience?
 - What happens to the sense of “I” in dreamless sleep?
 - And they sought invariants: in the constantly changing flow of human experience, is there anything that remains the same?
 - In the constantly changing flow of thought, is there an observer who remains the same?
 - Is there any thread of continuity, some level of reality higher than waking, in which these states of mind cohere?
4. And in concentrating on consciousness itself – “Who is the knower?” – they found they could separate strata of the mind and observe its workings as objectively as a botanist observes a flower.
5. Since consciousness is the field of all human activity, outward as well as inner – experience, action, imagination, knowledge, love – a science of consciousness holds out the promise of central principles that unify all of life.
6. And they asked, “What is that one by knowing which we can know the nature of everything else?” They found the answer in consciousness. Its study was called brahmavidya,

which means both “the supreme science” and “the science of the Supreme.”

7. Meditation here is not reflection or any other kind of discursive thinking. It is pure concentration: training the mind to dwell on an interior focus without wandering, until it becomes absorbed in the object of its contemplation. But absorption does not mean unconsciousness. The outside world may be forgotten, but meditation is a state of intense inner wakefulness.
8. “The faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention over and over again is the very root of judgment, character and will.
9. In dreaming, the Upanishad observes, we leave one world and enter another. “In that dream world there are no chariots, no animals to draw them, no roads to ride on, but one makes chariots and animals and roads oneself from the impressions of past experience.”
10. “Everyone experiences this, but no one knows the experienter.”
 - What is the same in both worlds, the observer both of waking experience and of dreams?
 - It cannot be the body, for in dreams it detaches itself from the body and senses and creates its own experiences – experiences which can be as real, in terms of physiological reactions, as those of waking life.
 - “When a man dreams that he is being killed or chased by an elephant, or that he is falling into a well, he experiences the same fear that he would in

the waking state”: his heart races, blood pressure rises, stress hormones pour into the body, just as if the event were real.

- Dream and waking are made of the same stuff, and as far as the nervous system is concerned, both kinds of experience are real.
- When we wake up from a dream, then, we do not pass from unreality to reality; we pass from a lower level of reality to a higher one.
- The sages found a clue: in dreamless sleep, the observing self-detaches itself not only from the body but from the mind. “As a tethered bird grows tired of flying about in vain to find a place of rest and settles down at last on its own perch, so the mind,” like the body, “settles down to rest” in dreamless sleep – an observation in harmony with current research, which suggests that in this state the autonomic nervous system is repaired.
- This still world is always present in the depths of the mind. It is the deepest, most universal layer of the unconscious. Wake up in this state, the Upanishads say, and you will be who you truly are, free from the conditioning of body and mind in a world unbounded by the limitations of time, space, and causality.
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- Yet this is dangerous territory. We know what forces can buffet us in the dream world, and that is only the foothills of the dark ranges of the mind, where fear, passion, egotism, and desire so easily sweep aside the will. One of Hopkins' "dark sonnets" hints at the dangers of these realms:
 - O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap May, who never hung there . . .
- The Katha Upanishad would agree. In famous words it warns that the ascent to the summit of consciousness is not for the timid: "Sharp like a razor's edge, the sages say, is the path to Reality, difficult to traverse."
- In haunting words, the Brihadaranyaka declares:
 - You are what your deep, driving desire is. As your desire is, so is your will.
 - As your will is, so is your deed.
 - As your deed is, so is your destiny.
- In Sanskrit this ardent, one-pointed, self-transcending passion is called tapas, and the Vedas revere it as an unsurpassable creative force. From the tapas of God, the Rig Veda says, the cosmos itself was born.

C. Atman & Brahman:

1. In meditation, as the mind settles down to dwell on a single focus, attention begins to flow in a smooth, unbroken stream, like oil poured from one container to another. As

this happens, attention naturally retreats from other channels. The ears, for example, still function, but you do not hear; attention is no longer connected with the organs of hearing.

2. When concentration is profound, there are moments when you forget the body entirely. This experience quietly dissolves physical identification. The body becomes like a comfortable jacket: you wear it easily, and in meditation you can unbutton and loosen it until it scarcely weighs on you at all.
3. The body is the first of many layers. These are, roughly, components of what we call “mind”: the senses, emotions, intellect, will.
 - As awareness is withdrawn from these layers of consciousness one by one, the sages gradually made another astonishing discovery: the powers of the mind have no life of their own.
 - The mind is not conscious; it is only an instrument of consciousness – or, in different metaphors, a process, a complex field of forces.
 - Yet when awareness is withdrawn from the mind, you remain aware. When this happens you realize you are not the mind, any more than you are the physical body.
4. When awareness has been consolidated even beyond the mind, little remains except the awareness of “I.”
 - Concentration is so profound that the mind-process has almost come to a standstill.
 - Space is gone, and time so attenuated that it scarcely seems real.

- This is a taste of shanti, “the peace that passeth understanding,”. You rest in meditation in what the Taittiriya Upanishad calls the “body of joy,” a silent, ethereal inner realm at the threshold of pure being.
- For a long while it may seem that there is nothing stirring in this still world, so deep in consciousness that the phenomena of the surface seem as remote as a childhood dream. But gradually you become aware of the presence of something vast, intimately your own but not at all the finite, limited self you had been calling “I.”
- All that divides us from the sea of infinite consciousness at this point is a thin envelope of personal identity. In the climax of meditation the barrier of individuality disappears, dissolving in a sea of pure, undifferentiated awareness.(turiya lies beyond waking, dreaming, and dreamless sleep)
- This complete absorption is samadhi.
- What remains when every trace of individuality is removed? We can call it pure being, for it is in differentiating this unity that created things acquire their name and form. The sages called it Brahman, from the root brih, “to expand.”
- This tremendous equation – “the Self call simply Atman is Brahman” – is the central discovery of the Upanishads.
- In samadhi, reality is condensed into pure potential, without dimensions, without time, without any differentiation. Physicists do not say there was nothing before the Big Bang; they say everything

came from that, and nothing more can be said. Similarly, samadhi is not emptiness but purnata: plenitude, complete fullness. The whole of reality is there, inner as well as outer: not only matter and energy but all time, space, causality, and states of consciousness.

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- That is his real form, where he is free from all desires because all his desires are fulfilled; for the Self is all our desire.”

D. The Discoveries:

1. They tell us, first, that whatever we are, whatever we may have done, there is in each of us an inalienable Self that is divine:
 - As the sun, who is the eye of the world,
 - Cannot be tainted by the defects in our eyes Nor by the objects it looks on,
 - So the one Self, dwelling in all,
 - Cannot be tainted by the evils of the world.
 - For this Self transcends all!

2. The ideal of the Upanishads is to live in the world in full awareness of life's unity, giving and enjoying, participating in others' sorrows and joys, but never unaware even for a moment that the world comes from God and returns to God.
3. The world is the wheel of God, turning round And round with all living creatures upon its rim. The world is the river of God, Flowing from him and flowing back to him. On this ever-revolving wheel of being the individual self goes round and round Through life after life, believing itself to be a separate creature, until it sees its identity with the Lord of Love and attains immortality in the indivisible whole.

THE UPANISHAD: The Isha Upanishad

- A. **Concept of Fullness:** The Upanishad begins with the idea that everything is full and originates from fullness. This signifies the divine completeness and abundance of existence.
- B. **The Presence of the Lord:** It emphasizes that the divine is present in the hearts of all beings and is the ultimate reality. Renunciation and detachment are encouraged as means to rejoice in the divine presence.
- C. **The Self and its Nature:** The text describes the Self as eternal, omnipresent, and beyond comprehension by the senses or the mind. It highlights the importance of realizing the unity of all existence through the understanding of the Self.
- D. **Action and Meditation:** The Upanishad suggests two paths to liberation: the path of action (Karma Yoga) and the path of meditation (Jnana Yoga). It also acknowledges the efficacy of combining both paths for spiritual progress.

- E. **The Seeker's Prayer:** The concluding verses express the seeker's yearning for enlightenment and liberation. The seeker prays for the removal of obstacles and for guidance towards the eternal truth.

The Katha Upanishad: Death as Teacher

A. The Nature of the Self

- Yama teaches Nachiketa about the eternal Self (1:21-29)
- The Self cannot be known through logic or scholarship (1:3-4)
- The Self can be attained only by those whom the Self chooses (1:23)
- The Self is beyond cause and effect, eternal and immutable (1:18)
- The Self is the source of all joy (1:22)

B. Meditation and Realization

- The path to realization is sharp and difficult (2:14)
- The senses are the horses, the mind is the reins, and the intellect is the charioteer (3:4)
- The senses derive from objects of sense-perception, and intellect from ego (3:10)
- The supreme Self is beyond name and form, without beginning or end (3:15)
- Those who realize the Self are forever free from the jaws of death (3:16)

C. The One Indivisible Self

- The Self is the sun, the wind, the fire, the guest, the fish, the plant, the river (2:2)

- The Self is the ruler supreme, inner Self of all (2:12)
- The Self is the light reflected by all (3:15)
- The Self is formless and can never be seen with these two eyes (3:9)

D. The Unmanifested Cause

- Brahman is the unmanifested Cause, attributeless, and omnipresent (3:8)
- Realizing Brahman, one is released from the cycle of birth and death (3:8)
- Brahman can be seen in a pure heart (3:5)
- The cosmos comes forth from Brahman and moves in him (3:2)

E. The Unitive State

- Yoga is the complete stillness of the senses, mind, and intellect (3:11)
- The unitive state cannot be attained through words or thoughts (3:12)
- The Lord of Love is ever enshrined in the hearts of all (3:17)
- Know thyself to be pure and immortal (3:17)
- Nachiketa learns the whole discipline of meditation (3:19)
- Blessed is everyone who knows the Self (3:19)

BRIHADARANYAKA: The Forest of Wisdom

A. The heavenly voice of the thunder repeats this teaching. *Da-da-da!* Be self-controlled! Give! Be compassionate!

B. But he is not affected by anything because he is detached and free; and after wandering here and there in the state of

dreaming, enjoying pleasures and seeing good and evil, he returns to the state from which he began.

- C. As a great fish swims between the banks of a river as it likes, so does the shining Self move between the states of dreaming and waking.
- D. As an eagle, weary after soaring in the sky, folds its wings and flies down to rest in its nest, so does the shining Self enter the state of dreamless sleep, where one is freed from all desires.
- E. The Self is free from desire, free from evil, free from fear.
- F. Where there is separateness, one sees another, smells another, tastes another, speaks to another, hears another, touches another, thinks of another, knows another.
- G. But where there is unity, one without a second, that is the world of Brahman. This is the supreme goal of life, the supreme treasure, the supreme joy. Those who do not seek this supreme goal live on but a fraction of this joy.
- H. Nature of soul.

The Chandogya Upanishad

- A. “There are four quarters: east, west, south, and north. This is one foot of Brahman, called the Shining. To meditate on these four is to become full of light and master the resplendent regions of the cosmos, knowing this portion of the truth.

- B. There are four quarters: earth, sky, heaven, and ocean. This is one foot of Brahman, called Without End. Know this, meditate on this reality, and your life will be without end on this earth.
- C. There are four quarters: fire, the sun, the moon, and lightning. These make one foot of Brahman, called Full of Light. To meditate on this fourfold foot of truth is to be filled with light in this world and master the world of light.
- D. “When a man is dying, his family all gather round and ask, ‘Do you know me? Do you know me?’ And so long as his speech has not merged in mind, his mind in prana, prana in fire, and fire in pure Being, he knows them all. But there is no more knowing when speech merges in mind, mind in prana, prana in fire, and fire in pure Being.
- E. On its own glory – no, not even on that. In the world people think they can attain glory by having cows and horses, elephants and gold, family and servants, fields and mansions. But I do not call that glory, for here one thing depends on another. Utterly independent is the Infinite.

The Shvetashvatara Upanishad

- A. In deep meditation aspirants may See forms like snow or smoke. They may feel A strong wind blowing or a wave of heat.
- B. They may see within them more and more light: Fireflies, lightning, sun, or moon. These are signs That they are well on their way to Brahman.

- C. Health, a light body, freedom from cravings, A glowing skin, sonorous voice, fragrance Of body: these signs indicate progress.
- D. In the supreme climax of samadhi They realize the presence of the Lord Within their heart. Freed from impurities, They pass forever beyond birth and death.
- E. O Lord, in whom alone we can find peace, May we see your divine Self and be freed From all impure thoughts and all fear.
- F. He is the supreme Lord, who through his grace Moves us to seek him in our own hearts. He is the light that shines forever.

The Tejobindu Upanishad

- A. To be united with the Lord of Love Is to be freed from all conditioning. This is the state of Self-realization, Far beyond the reach of words and thoughts.
- B. To be united with the Lord of Love, Imperishable, changeless, beyond cause And effect, is to find infinite joy. Brahman is beyond all duality, Beyond the reach of thinker and of thought.
- C. Brahman cannot be realized by those Who are subject to greed, fear, and anger. Brahman cannot be realized by those Who are subject to the pride of name and fame Or to the vanity of scholarship. Brahman cannot be realized by those Who are enmeshed in life's duality.

The Amritabindu Upanishad

- It is the mind that frees us or enslaves. Driven by the senses we become bound; Master of the senses we become free. Those who seek freedom must master their senses.
- When the mind is detached from the senses One reaches the summit of consciousness. Mastery of the mind leads to wisdom. Practice meditation. Stop all vain talk. The highest state is beyond reach of thought, For it lies beyond all duality.

The Paramahansa Upanishad

- He has renounced all selfish attachments And observes no rites and ceremonies. He has only minimum possessions, and lives his life for the welfare of all.
- He has no staff nor tuft nor sacred thread. He faces heat and cold, pleasure and pain, honor and dishonor with equal calm. He is not affected by calumny, Pride, jealousy, status, joy, or sorrow, Greed, anger, or infatuation, Excitement, egoism, or other goads; For he knows he is neither body nor mind.
- Free from the sway of doubt and false knowledge He lives united with the Lord of Love, who is ever serene, immutable, Indivisible, the source of all joy.
- For him the universe is his garment And the Lord not separate from himself. He offers no ancestral oblations; He praises nobody, blames nobody, Is never dependent on anyone.

- He has no need to repeat the mantram, No more need to practice meditation. The world of change and changeless Reality are one to him, for he sees all in God
- The aspirant who is seeking the Lord must free himself from selfish attachments to people, money, and possessions.
- When his mind sheds every selfish desire, He becomes free from the duality of pleasure and pain and rules his senses. No more is he capable of ill will; No more is he subject to elation, for his senses come to rest in the Self. Entering into the unitive state, He attains the goal of evolution. Truly he attains the goal of evolution.
- " As generally used, prana means "(living) energy": all the "vital signs" by which we try to identify the presence of life are tokens of the capacity of a body to direct, conserve, and employ energy at a high level of complexity.
 - The Upanishadic sages worked out the primacy of prana over its various functions in the body by what we call thought-experiments.
 - One might imagine, for example, what would happen if the individual faculties (in Sanskrit, indriyas) leave a person one by one: as sight leaves, the person would go blind, and so forth, but still live.
 - This is exactly what we find in the Brihadaranyaka (VI.1.7–13) and other Upanishads. But when prana itself makes ready to leave, "like a great stallion pulling up the stakes by which he was tethered," all the faculties gather round and beg it to remain, declaring they have learned their lesson: they all derive their existence from prana. Or one might

imagine what would happen if all the faculties left and came back to the inert body one by one: how would sight function by itself if one were not conscious? This is the Aitareya experiment, and there are others in the Prashna and elsewhere.

- “If our theory is correct, death should only occur when prana itself goes, and conversely life should resume when it returns.”
- “suitability of the cognitive equipment to its task”: the senses and the mind (which Indians considered the chief sense) must be brought to a stillness, usually by assiduous training, in order for us to become aware of prana and what lies beyond even that.
- India has had its share of religious intolerance, but thanks to its paradigm of unity-in-diversity and its cumulative strategy for preserving culture, those individuals and communities who respond to outward forms of worship have kept their place and dignity in the system, while at the other extreme individuals who have really had mystical experience have been unusually free to transcend all religious forms and not only follow their own path but become beacons for the culture as a whole. “As men approach me, so I receive them,” Sri Krishna says in the Gita. “All paths, Arjuna, lead to me” (Gita 4.11). This too helps explain the mixtures, or more properly layers, of religious consciousness displayed in the Upanishads.